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FBI's unwelcome mat still out for Libyan 'hit team'

By Terence Hunt

WASHINGTON (AP)—Whatever happened to the Libyan hit team that was variously reported to have slipped into the United States, to be hiding in Mexico, or to have flown to Paris en route to Boston?

Was the plot called off? And was there one assassination team or two? Or were there any?

The high drama opened late last year: A team of assassins trained in Libya was said to be stalking President Reagan. Security was tightened. Presidential appearances were curtailed. U.S. borders were watched. Sketches of potential assassins were distributed.

And nothing happened. No attacks. No arrests. Nothing.

More than 2½ months after the fears first surfaced, publicity about the purported plot has faded. Yet, the vigilance around Reagan and top government officials has not been relaxed.

So what has happened?

WITH RARE exceptions, government officials refuse to speak on the record about the sensitive subject.

"We consider the threat as active as it once was," said a senior administration official who refused to be identified. "We haven't let down our guard."

Indeed, a high-ranking law enforcement official said Libyan strongman Moammar Khadafy might have planted stories the plot had been canceled. "That's what you would do if you were still planning to make an attempt."

As the story slipped off the front pages, there were fewer tips for law enforcement officials to follow.

"There is much less information coming into the bureau than there was a month ago," said FBI spokesman Roger Young. "Thus far we haven't established the presence in the United States of a Libyan hit team. It's been a lot of extra work without finding a Libyan hit team."

"As the leads dwindle," Young added, "there will be less manpower spent on it." He said the investigation remains a

high priority—part of an across-the-board effort against terrorism.

THE CONTINUED high state of security around Reagan is obvious.

Reagan's motorcade frequently uses two limousines now—one for the President and a decoy car to confuse any attacker. A counterassault team rides behind the armored presidential limousine in a van, with agents holding the doors ajar in case they have to spring out.

Reagan wasn't even in the motorcade when it pulled away from the White House Jan. 26 en route to Capitol Hill for his State of the Union address. His limousine left the White House by another gate, joined the motorcade in progress and the entourage took an indirect route to the Capitol.

Flight paths have been altered for Reagan's helicopter trips to the presidential retreat at Camp David. The President's helicopter and Air Force One now carry missile defense systems.

SOME CIA AND Justice Department officials privately expressed serious doubts about the soundness of intelligence reports about the alleged team and whether it really existed. Yet a law en-

forcement official said tips came from various sources, and that the person considered the best source submitted to a lie detector test and passed.

Opinions vary.

"We believed at one time there was (a hit team)," said one administration official, speaking anonymously. "Maybe it's disbanded." The official said he never saw anything that pinpointed the location of any team.

Another administration official, who also refused to be identified, said, "I have an idea the United States still thinks they're somewhere on the North American continent."

ON CAPITOL HILL, the purported plot once was the subject of briefings for the congressional leadership and members of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees. No more, though. There haven't been any briefings since before Christmas.

Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker (R., Tenn.) retains the round-the-clock protection he was assigned when the threat against Reagan became public. Overall security in the Capitol also remains at a higher level.

Reagan's top three White House aides—James A. Baker, Edwin Meese and Michael K. Deaver—also remain under Secret Service protection that began in early December.

A review is planned soon about whether Baker still needs protection, according to a congressional source. A recent review of the need for security around Meese, Deaver and James Baker concluded that it should continue, according to the source.

BAKER HAS SAID the threat to Reagan has diminished. Likewise, Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan (N.Y.), ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said as far back as December that, "Now that their cover is blown, the action is known . . . you will probably see the disappearance of the group involved."

White House aides speculate that interest in the hit team was diverted by the military crackdown in Poland and the Christmas holidays.

Reagan helped fuel the story by publicly denouncing Khadafy. But White House officials insist the story first leaked from the FBI and Secret Service.

As the leaks turned into a torrent, Reagan became upset, a White House source said, "and let his anger be known. He mentioned it at Cabinet meetings. It stopped the wholesale leaking."

Most officials won't talk about it on the record, either. White House deputy press secretary Larry Speakes had no comment on the matter. Chris Ross, a State Department spokesman, said, "Nobody who is dealing with Libya these days feels able to speak to the press."